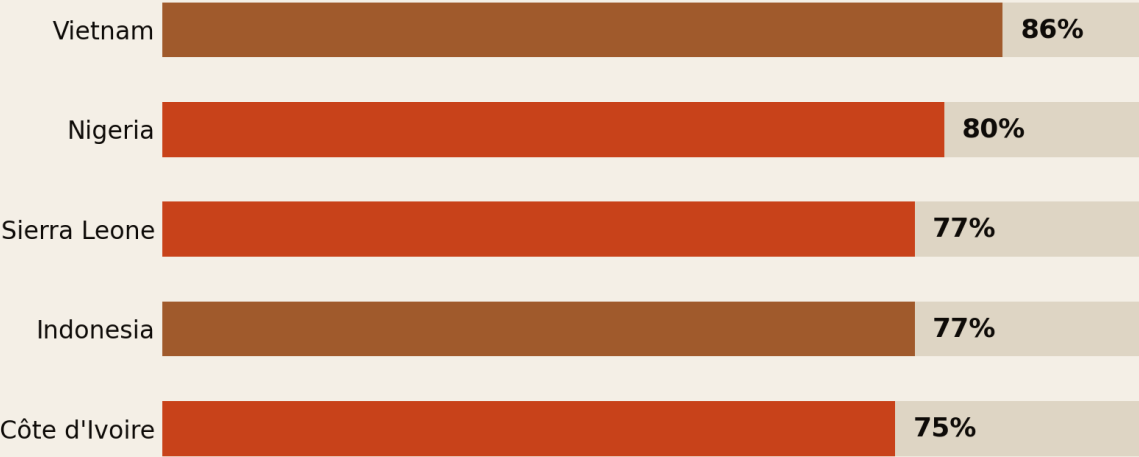
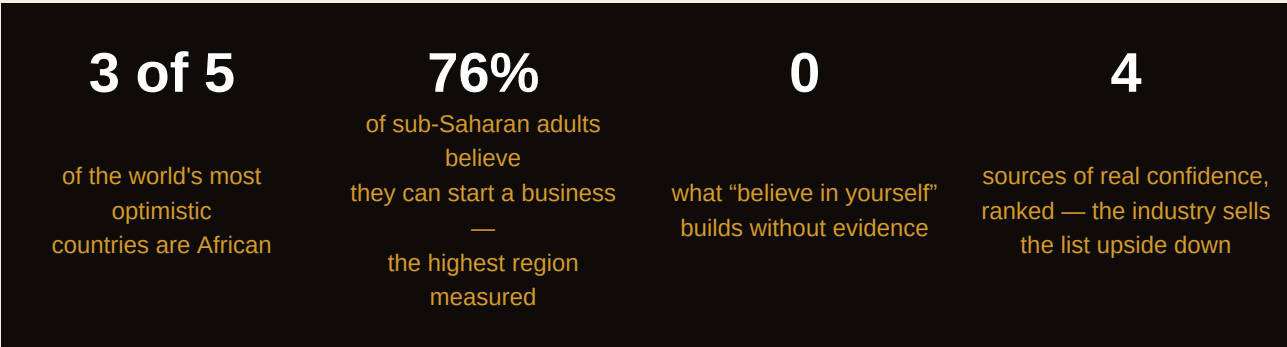


AGF RESEARCH · FACT-CHECKED · 2026

The Most Optimistic *people on earth.*

By the numbers, Africans are the most confident people alive: three of the five most optimistic countries on earth, and the highest entrepreneurial self-belief of any region ever measured. This report asks what that confidence actually is, why the same person so often goes quiet abroad — and what half a century of psychology says about getting it back.



Share expecting the coming year to be better (Gallup International).
Three of the five most optimistic countries on earth are African. Western Europe sits far below.

Fig 1 — Share expecting the coming year to be better (Gallup International). Three of the five most optimistic countries on earth are African; Western Europe sits far below.

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01 · The Short Version

Everyone in this network has seen both halves of the puzzle. The uncle in Kumasi who has failed at four businesses and describes the fifth with total certainty. And the brilliant cousin in Toronto — top of her class at home — who now rewrites one email for forty minutes. Same family, same culture, opposite confidence. This report is about why.

- **African confidence is real and measured.** Nigeria (80%), Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire sit among the five most optimistic countries on earth, while Western Europe sits near the bottom. And **76% of sub-Saharan adults believe they have the skills to start a business** — the highest of any region GEM has measured.
- **The paradox is the direction.** The world's highest confidence sits in some of its hardest circumstances — while **East Asian students top every global test with below-average stated self-belief**. Whatever confidence is, it is not a readout of conditions.
- **Psychology splits it into two things.** *Optimism* is a feeling about the future in general. *Self-efficacy* — Bandura's term — is an evidence-based judgement that you can do a specific thing. The African data is strongest on the first. The second is built one way only: by doing.
- **On the second measure, Africa has a hidden advantage.** The informal economy is a machine for *mastery experience* — nobody at the market stall waits until they feel ready. The action-before-readiness loop the confidence literature prescribes is the African street's default setting.
- **Migration dismantles it — structurally, not psychologically.** Self-efficacy is domain-specific and evidence-based; migration changes the domain and voids the evidence. Add the foreign-experience discount, the silent name-based rejections and stereotype threat, and the confident arrival's quiet second year is not a personality change. It is a ledger change.
- **What rebuilds it is boring and specific:** small mastery wins at the edge of ability, models who genuinely resemble you, values-affirmation before high-stakes moments — and almost never the imported “believe in yourself” ritual, which the evidence has been unkind to for seventy years.

Africa did not learn confidence from a book, and the diaspora will not get it back from one. It was built by acting before feeling ready — and that is exactly how it is rebuilt, anywhere.

02 · The Measured Facts

Year after year, the global optimism surveys find **hope concentrated in Africa, South Asia and Latin America, and anxiety concentrated in the rich West**. In the latest Gallup International round, **Nigeria (80% expecting a better year), Sierra Leone (77%) and Côte d'Ivoire** sit in the world's top five; much of Europe sits at the bottom. Fig 1 on the cover has the table.



of adults in sub-Saharan Africa say they have the skills and knowledge to start a business — the highest of any region GEM has measured.

GEM sub-Saharan Africa regional survey. Self-assessed, which is part of this report's subject.

Fig 2 — GEM's sub-Saharan Africa regional survey. South Africa is the striking outlier within the region, at roughly half the regional rate.

The second measure is closer to this report's subject, because it is not about the world — it is about the self. Asked whether they personally have *the skills and knowledge to start a business*, **about 76% of sub-Saharan adults say yes** — the highest regional figure in the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor's data. The region with the least capital and the hardest operating conditions contains the people most convinced they can build something.

03 · Two Different Things

OPTIMISM

- A feeling about the future in general
- “Things will be better next year”
- Can float free of any evidence
- What the surveys measure

SELF-EFFICACY

- A judgement about a specific task
- “I can rebuild this engine / pass this exam”
- Calibrated to what you have actually done
- What predicts whether you act and persist

Fig 3 — The distinction the whole report turns on, from Bandura's 1977 self-efficacy theory.

In 1977, Albert Bandura drew the line the confidence conversation still ignores. What predicts whether a person attempts a difficult task and persists is **not how they feel about themselves in general** — it is whether they believe, *based on real evidence*, that they can execute the specific behaviours the situation demands. Self-efficacy is a judgement, not a feeling; it is domain-specific; and it is calibrated to what you have actually done, which is why it cannot be chanted into existence.

Apply the split to the two charts above. The optimism surveys measure the general feeling — Africa leads the world. The GEM question sits closer to efficacy — Africa leads there too, but self-assessed. The interesting question is which kind survives migration. The answers are different, and the difference is the whole story.

04 · The Fallacy Africa Never Needed

The modern self-help industry descends substantially from one anxious 1950s preacher, Norman Vincent Peale, whose method compresses to a single instruction: **generate the feeling of confidence first, then act**. The research verdict, accumulated over decades, is bruising.

- **Affirmations can backfire for the people who need them most.** In a widely cited 2009 study, people with low self-esteem who repeated “I am a lovable person” felt *worse*. (A 2020 replication with larger samples found no effect either way — we report both — but the underlying mechanisms are robust.)
- **Fantasy visualisation drains motivation.** Oettingen’s three decades of work show that vividly imagining the achieved goal satisfies the motivation system prematurely. Positive *expectations* grounded in past behaviour predict success; positive *fantasies* predict less effort.
- **The causation runs backwards.** High performers do not perform because they feel calm; they feel calm because they have performed. **Competence is the engine. Confidence is the readout.**

Most of Africa never adopted the Peale model — because most of Africa never had the option of waiting to feel ready.

05 · The Action-First Continent



Confidence is the readout at the end of the loop — the trailing indicator of work already done. The market stall, the okada, the side hustle: the informal economy runs this loop daily, because it has no other option.

Fig 4 — The action-first loop the confidence research prescribes — and the informal economy runs by default.

The informal economy — the majority employer across most of the continent — is structurally incapable of the Peale model. Nobody at Balogun market conducts a visualisation exercise before opening the stall. Necessity runs the loop daily: act with no cushion, survive, adjust, act again. Failure is frequent, public, and *ordinary* — which drains it of the paralysing weight it carries in salaried cultures.

This reframes the GEM number. When 76% of sub-Saharan adults say they can start a business, a large part is **accurate self-report from people who have already run the loop**: traded, hustled, recovered, improvised. Their efficacy has an evidence base — simply one that formal institutions do not recognise. Two more African confidence structures deserve naming: **early responsibility** (the child sent to the market at eight is accumulating mastery experiences) and **communal witness** (your record is public, which converts personal history into socially confirmed evidence). Both are efficacy machines. Neither travels well.

06 · The Immune System

Much of the optimism data is, by any calibrated standard, unrealistic. Is that a flaw? In a landmark 1988 review, Taylor and Brown showed that **mentally healthy adults systematically overestimate themselves** — while it is the mildly depressed who see themselves most accurately. These “positive illusions” function as a **psychological immune system**: a background process that softens reality enough to keep people functional and taking daily risks.

Read the African data through that lens and it inverts the condescending interpretation. Unrealistic optimism under hard conditions is not naivety. It is **the immune system working at scale** — the evolved psychological infrastructure of populations that kept functioning through currency collapses, coups and droughts that would flatten a calibrated pessimist. Faith belongs here too: the world's most religious continent runs a daily discipline of hope, communal reinforcement and reinterpretation of setbacks that maps directly onto this machinery.

One caution, and it matters: **the functional dose of self-delusion is greater than zero, but small** — and it works only when stacked on real evidence. Optimism riding on a record is fuel. Optimism *instead of* a record is the fifth business plan that ignores why the first four died. Our investment research is, among other things, a catalogue of the immune system overdosing.

07 · The Outliers

Confidence is spoken in dialects — how loudly a culture states self-belief is not a measure of what it can do

East Asia	Understates it	Top of every global test — and below-average stated confidence. In Shanghai and Japan the correlation inside the classroom runs negative.
United States	Overstates it	The home of positive thinking and the “above-average effect” — most drivers rate themselves better than the median driver.
Nordic countries	Suppresses it	Jante norms: visible self-belief reads as arrogance. Low stated confidence, high institutional trust doing the work instead.
Africa	Declares it	Highest measured optimism and entrepreneurial self-belief on earth — under some of the hardest conditions on earth.

Fig 5 — Confidence as dialect. Stated self-belief varies by culture far more than capability does.

East Asia is the mirror image of Africa. Students in Japan, Korea and Shanghai top every international assessment — while reporting *below-average* confidence, and inside the highest-performing systems the within-country correlation between stated confidence and scores runs negative. The world's least confident-sounding students are its most capable, exactly as the world's most confident-sounding region is its least capitalised. **The Nordics suppress it** (Jante norms); **the United States overstates it** (the culture that invented Peale also produces the above-average effect).

How loudly a culture speaks confidence tells you almost nothing about what its people can do. Confidence talk is a dialect. Capability is a record. The tragedy of

migration is arriving somewhere that grades your dialect while being unable to read your record.

08 · What Migration Does to a Confident Person

Five things migration does to a confident person — none of them a personality change

01 Your record stops counting

Self-efficacy is evidence-based — and the new market discounts the evidence.
The foreign-experience penalty halves callbacks before anyone meets you.

02 The domain changes underneath you

Bandura's confidence is domain-specific. The person who could navigate any Lagos office is a beginner at Canadian small talk — and mistakes that for decline.

03 A threat enters the room

Stereotype threat — measured first on Black students — taxes cognitive bandwidth. The cost comes from carrying the threat, not from ability.

04 The models disappear

Vicarious confidence needs someone like you, two steps ahead. In many elite domains abroad, the person who resembles you is not in the building.

05 The audience stays home, judging

Our shame research: you remain accountable to a community that can no longer see your circumstances. Failure abroad is failure with witnesses.

Fig 6 — The dismantling, assembled from Bandura's framework and this library's own measured findings.

Why does the most confident population on earth produce so many quietly hesitant people abroad? Not fragility. Take Bandura's three properties — evidence-based, domain-specific, built by mastery — and migration attacks each in turn. **The evidence is voided:** foreign-only experience roughly halves callbacks; the name alone costs 40–50% more silence; every unexplained rejection is a small downward update from an environment that stopped crediting your history. **The domain shifts:** the skills that made you formidable in Lagos are real skills in a domain that no longer exists around you — domain-specificity misread as personal decline. **The witnesses are gone, replaced by judges:** the communal record stays home; the audience without the evidence remains.

Understand this structurally and the shame lifts. The confident Nigerian who becomes a hesitant Torontonion has not changed personality. **The inputs to confidence changed, and the output followed.** Inputs can be re-engineered.

09 · The Threat in the Room

Stereotype threat, formalised by Steele and Aronson in 1995 and first measured on Black students, is the performance cost of knowing your group is negatively stereotyped in the domain you are performing in. Managing the threat consumes cognitive bandwidth, and performance drops below ability. Three things matter here: **the cost comes from carrying the threat, not from any deficit in ability**, which is why it vanishes when the threat is lifted; it compounds the CV findings — the screen discounts your record before the room, the threat taxes you inside it; and it is specifically a confidence thief, because underperformance you can feel happening reads internally as confirmation. The threat manufactures the evidence for itself.

10 · The Affirmation That Actually Works

The researcher who discovered stereotype threat also documented the one affirmation practice that reliably neutralises it — and it looks nothing like Peale. In **values affirmation**, a person under threat writes briefly about something they genuinely value *in a completely unrelated domain* — faith, family, a craft. In the canonical experiments, women who did this before a hard maths test performed at the level of unthreatened peers. Affirming an unrelated strength restores the broader self, so the threatened domain shrinks to a small fraction of who you are.

- **Affirm sideways, never at the target.** Writing “I am good at interviews” before an interview spotlights the fear and backfires. Writing about your mother’s cooking, your faith, or the team you coach — that works. The African diaspora is unusually rich in exactly the affirmable material this requires.
- **Keep affirmations small, specific and evidenced.** “I prepare carefully for hard conversations” survives contact with your own scepticism. “I am unstoppable” is a flag planted across a canyon you have not crossed.
- **Note the trap:** the effect fades when it becomes a self-conscious technique. This is a practice of remembering who you are, not a chant about who you wish to be.

11 · The Four Sources, for the Diaspora



Bandura's four sources of self-efficacy, ranked by impact. Bar lengths are illustrative of the ranking, not measured effect sizes. The confidence industry sells the list upside down.

Fig 7 — Bandura's ranking. Bar lengths illustrate the ordering, not measured effect sizes.

For the diaspora, the second source is the strategic one. **Vicarious experience works only when the model genuinely resembles you** — watching a native-born executive succeed tells your calibration system nothing about what *you* can do; watching a compatriot who arrived three years ago with your accent and your credential succeed tells it everything. This is why representation is machinery rather than sentiment — and why a functioning diaspora network is, quite literally, **confidence infrastructure**: a curated supply of believable models two steps ahead.

12 · Rebuilding the Record Abroad

Rebuilding the record abroad — what the evidence actually supports

01 Shrink the first attempt

Mastery experience is the heaviest lever, and it compounds from small wins. Make the first action too small to fail; let the record restart from there.

02 Find the person two steps ahead

Not the celebrity — the compatriot who arrived three years before you and navigated the same system. That is what a diaspora network is for.

03 Affirm your values, not your target

Steele's evidence: before the interview, write about what you already are — the faith, the family, the craft. Never chant about the thing you fear.

04 Rename the adrenaline

The same surge reads as “terrified” or “ready.” Interpretation is the only part of the body's signal you control — and it is trainable.

05 Keep the optimism; add the ledger

The inherited confidence is an asset — the psychological immune system of a continent. Attach it to specific, finishable evidence and it becomes unstoppable.

Fig 8 — The rebuild, ordered by the strength of the evidence behind each practice.

Restart the record small — mastery compounds from wins at the edge of current ability, not from leaps; the uncle with the market stall was never too proud for small, and that is why he is confident. **Engineer your models** — find the person who resembles you and is slightly ahead; mentoring someone behind you rebuilds your own calibration too. **Deploy values affirmation** before high-stakes moments — sideways. **Reinterpret the body** — the surge before the interview reads as “terrified” or “ready” depending on the story attached. And **spend the inheritance wisely**: the optimism you carry is the immune system of a continent, unstoppable when attached to a specific, finishable, evidence-generating plan — and dangerous when asked to substitute for one.

13 · The Uncomfortable Part

First, some of the confidence gap abroad is rational, and calling it “imposter syndrome” obscures that.

The popular framing locates the problem inside the migrant's head. Our research measured the outside: the screen that discounts the record, the name that halves the callbacks, the threat in the room. The hesitancy is partly accurate perception, and the fix is partly environmental — networks, referrals, targeting — rather than therapeutic. Telling people to feel confident inside a machine built to discount them is Peale with better branding.

Second, African confidence has a shadow side this report cannot skip. The same culture that produces magnificent self-belief also produces the fifth identical business, the “God will provide” that replaces the feasibility study, and the confident wire transfer into the scheme that collapses. Optimism uncorrected by ledgers is how CBEX happened. The raw material is world-class; the calibration layer is what needs building.

Third, the loudest person in the room is still not the most capable — and the diaspora knows both errors from both sides. East Asia's results argue a culture can run on quiet competence; America's argue that stated confidence opens doors regardless. The wise position is bilingual: keep the record honest, and learn to speak the local confidence dialect fluently enough that your record gets read.

Confidence was never the feeling of being certain. It is the accumulated evidence of having survived uncertainty — and by that definition, nobody on earth arrives abroad with more of it than an African who got there.

14 · Method & Limits

This report combines cross-national survey data with the experimental psychology of confidence, as at 24 August 2026.

- **All cross-cultural confidence data is self-report, which is partly the phenomenon itself.** Modesty and self-enhancement norms shape how people answer surveys, not only how they feel. We treat stated confidence as a dialect precisely because the measurement problem and the finding are entangled.
- **The optimism figures are from Gallup International's end-of-year survey;** wording, sampling and urban skews vary by country, and single-year rankings move. The pattern — Global South optimism, Western anxiety — is stable across years and rival surveys; the percentages are snapshots. Kenya illustrates the volatility: historically among the most optimistic countries in youth surveys, yet last on youth economic confidence in the 2026 African Youth Survey.
- **The GEM 76% comes from the sub-Saharan regional analysis and is not a 2026 measurement;** country values vary widely (South Africa sits near 40%). It is self-assessed capability — which is part of the subject rather than a nuisance.
- **The East Asian negative correlation is an ecological finding** about groups and systems; it does not mean confidence harms an individual student.
- **The psychology cited is the replicated core** — Bandura, Steele, Taylor & Brown, Oettingen — and where a famous result has replication trouble (the 2009 affirmation study), we said so in the text. These are levers, not switches.
- **Sections 05 and 06 are interpretive.** No study measures the informal economy as an efficacy machine or African optimism as a Taylor-Brown immune system; these are our syntheses, labelled as argument rather than measurement.
- **The framework reached us partly through a secondary source** — Mark Manson's *Confidence Guide*, shared by a member of this network. We went to the primary papers and cite those; the guide is credited as the pointer, not as evidence.
- **Nothing here is clinical advice.** Persistent anxiety or depression is a medical matter, not a calibration exercise.

Principal sources

Gallup International end-of-year global survey; GEM sub-Saharan Africa regional report; Bandura (1977) on self-efficacy and its four sources; Steele & Aronson (1995) on stereotype threat and Martens et al. (2006) on values affirmation; Taylor & Brown (1988) on positive illusions; Wood et al. (2009) and the 2020 replications on affirmations; Oettingen on fantasy and motivation; Amabile & Kramer's progress principle; PISA analyses of the East Asian confidence paradox. Located partly via Mark Manson's Confidence Guide. Full inline links in the web edition.

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